

# Making sense of today's labour movement

as we confront the burden of the future

– By Monique Marks

Marks is the head of the Urban Futures Centre at the Durban University of Technology. She is an internationally recognised and rated researcher and has won a number of prestigious awards for her research and engagement work. She is a visiting research professor at the Australian National University, Chairperson of the Human Science Research Council (HSRC) Press and a director of the Bellhaven Harm Reduction Centre.

*Professor MONIQUE MARKS presents a unique take on the new challenges and opportunities facing the labour movement in South Africa today. In a speech she gave at the 1973 Durban Strikes 50<sup>th</sup> Remembrance last year to celebrate the significance and the gains of the 'Durban Moment',<sup>1</sup> she emphasised the need to provide hope and a sense of belonging to those currently relegated to the margins of society.*

While celebrating the 1973 Durban Moment, our reflections at this time require a blunt honesty and a perspective that does not rely on nostalgia. It is time for us to provoke, to challenge and then to find ways of consolidating.

I begin by telling a story that helps to make sense of our current reality, or at least one aspect of it. From this story I will draw a couple of conclusions and present some provocations. I am going to reflect first on the changed landscape of youth politics in South Africa – from apartheid to close to 30 years post-apartheid. This, I hope, will provide a lens into what the labour movement needs to confront and embrace going forward.

As a young person I was part of the Johannesburg Youth Congress (Joyco), an affiliate of the United Democratic Front (UDF). My political activism informed my academic work and my first book, *Young Warriors*, focused on youth politics in the 1980s and early 1990s. I researched and wrote the book as an insider to the movement but an outsider to Soweto where the study was located.

Those were tumultuous times, but young people were inspired, engaged, hopeful. Young people, even those from primary school age, were at the coalface of the liberation movement and were arguably the greatest force of the mass democratic movement. In the face of heavy repression and loss, young people had hope. Hope of a responsive and responsible government. Hope of a future free of racism and racist thinking. Hope of social mobility bound by collective aspirations. At one of the most difficult and repressive periods of South Africa's history, young people were actively changing the world and could imagine – imagine – a new horizon, one that promoted and secured social, political and economic rights.

The Freedom Charter provided a frame for this imagination – a roadmap of a new, a better society, free of socially constructed divides and discrimination. This imagination was a mobilising force. And in this looking forward they were not alone. Organised youth worked alongside the trade union movement, civics and other social movement organisations. They felt a sense of connection to people, to place, to politics and to a social movement.

I have my own memories of attending weekly Congress of South African Trade

Unions (Cosatu) shop steward meetings as a Joyco representative. To be frank, at the time I was not entirely sure why I was doing this, but I do know that I was excited to be part of a broader movement and to join hands with organised workers. Connection, hope and purpose characterised this period for South African activist youth.

I fast-track now to the present moment. Much of what I do now remains youth focused though without an obvious political dimension. Aside from running the Urban Futures Centre at the Durban University of Technology, I also co-direct a harm reduction centre for homeless people and low-income people with substance use disorders.

The majority of our beneficiaries are under the age of 35, with most in their 20s. The Bellhaven Harm Reduction Centre provides free medical and psycho-social interventions to 200 people who have an opioid use disorder. Most are using low-grade heroin, known to most of us as *whoonga*, *nyaope*, *unga* or sugars. As harm reduction practitioners our role is not to judge our clients, or to prescribe what life normalisation means to them. This is determined individually as we recognise that the drivers of problematic drug use are complex and that an abstinence-based approach does not take heed of the agency of individual users, nor the context that drives problematic drug use.

The Bellhaven Harm Reduction Centre has its roots in the Covid-19 lockdown when a team approached by the then Deputy Mayor of eThekweni Municipality, Belinda Scott, was asked to establish a withdrawal management programme in the homeless lockdown safe spaces. Within a week, in the underground parking lot of Moses Mabhida stadium, a medical programme was established offering those in moderate to mild withdrawal from low-grade heroin an opioid substitute medication. By the end of hard lockdown roughly 450 homeless people were beneficiaries of the programme – receiving methadone, an opioid substitution medication that minimises withdrawal symptoms and thus provides a platform for life normalisation. A private medical team under the supervision of specialist psychiatrist Dr Shaquir Salduker was responsible for running this programme.

This intervention quickly transformed the lives of its recipients, most of whom were youth between the ages of 19 and 35. The programme received substantive press attention and was acclaimed as a 'good story' by the eThekweni Municipality. As a result, the Municipality, in a forward-looking manner, determined that one of its buildings – Belhaven Memorial Museum – would be designated for the running of a full-time harm reduction centre.

The Bellhaven Harm Reduction Centre opened its doors on 1 June 2020 and has been running ever since. As harm reduction practitioners, we do not set a one-size-fits-all goal for our clients. Rather, harm reduction practitioners accompany clients to meet their self-determined goals. These may or may not be abstinence.

We recognise that, for a range of reasons, our clients may be unwilling or unable to stop using drugs. Harm reduction practitioners and advocates recognise the fundamental human rights of people who use drugs to self-determination and to access services that provide a platform for life change in a non-stigmatising environment.

Instead of seeing drugs and the people who use them as a problem, we seek to understand the problems that drive problematic drug use. Where possible, we

work with our clients to resolve these. Where these are structural, it is critical to engage actors and organisations that are in the business of effecting social and economic justice.

It is in the harm reduction space that I meet with and learn from young people living on the margins of society but representing the broader youth cohort. Through my daily interactions, psycho-social service provision and oral history making, I have come to understand that the biggest drivers of problematic drug use is not individual failure nor sheer recklessness. Rather, it is a rational response to staring into a future that is bleak and hopeless. It is a release from a life that lacks connection to place, people and purpose.

My daily interactions with young people now are about bleakness rather than light, despair rather than hope and isolation rather than connection. Given the socio- economic and political context, this is hardly surprising. Beneficiaries of the Bellhaven Harm Reduction Centre have little or no chance of employment or decent livelihood opportunities. They are disconnected from key institutions and from organisational life. Family structures are in disarray. Non-communicable illnesses are on the increase. It is this reality that drives problematic drug use. Instead of understanding these drivers, people who use drugs are subject to prejudicial moral judgement. As 'degenerates' they are pushed further to the margins adding fuel to active drug use rather than resolving it.

The reality is that drugs are a solution rather than a problem. The problem is not the drugs or the people who use them, but rather the structural problems and disconnect that characterises South Africa. It is therefore not surprising that problematic drug use is on the increase in South Africa. Youth are looking straight into what is best called the burden of the future. As hope fades, drugs bring comfort and relief. But with drug use comes homelessness and further disconnect from loved ones and from key institutions. Blunted to this reality, we retain drug policies that punish users, while providing no alternative solutions.

What does all of this mean for the labour movement? While we might like to believe that our young people are engaged in 'productive work' either in the formal or informal economy, my view of this cohort's reality is very different. Hustling has become the dominant way of getting by – a survivalist strategy that does not generate a sense of meaning, purpose or productivity. They are not part of what could be termed the working class. Rather, what we have is a huge population grouping that could best be defined as the lumpen proletariat. Their plight is beyond that of the reserve army of labour given that there is a labour market deficit.

Moreover, the hustle is not a good hustle. It is one that gets the hustler from one fix to the next, with a four-hour window of opportunity. There is no future in this hustle, just a blurred present. And money from the hustle is 'sweet' – it comes and goes without accumulation. It is enjoyed in the moment with no lasting effect other than inflaming the problem, much like sugar does to the body.

Given that in most cases, the hustle is linked to drug use, engaging in productive labour is unlikely. In our social context problematic drug use is harmful as its ability to fix a void is temporary, while the fall out is etched into the lived realities of the drug use community.

What is salient in young people's lives is not productive labour or engaging in

formal organisations, it is substance use. As a harm reduction practitioner and advocate, I am respectful of the choices people make as to what they put into their bodies. I recognise their agency and their fundamental rights.

And, in line with the harm reduction approach, I am cognisant that people who use drugs do so as a solution to underlying problems – they are true survivors of inequity, trauma and disconnect. Their very existence should prick our consciousness and nudge us to rethink dominant narratives about drug use, productive labour and a post-apartheid future.

The drug use community, particularly those who are homeless, live lives that are beyond precarious. They are momentary with little meaning other than making it from one fix to the next. The hustle is their business, bearing no reality to the term ‘productive labour’. The hustle has no real value (use or exchange). To the contrary, it is degrading to those who engage in it and generates fear for those who encounter hustlers. This reality – the space of non-productive labour and purposeless existence - calls upon us to gaze less at the burden of the past (colonialism and apartheid) and more to the burden of the future.

The burden of the future frames much of what South Africa has to face going forward, but it is not the sole determinant of where we could and should be headed. It is time now to make sense of this present future reality and to rethink labour movement strategies from this perspective. Doing this requires new narratives and strategies to break away from burdens of the past and towards resolving the conditions that make looking ahead so bleak, particularly for young people, our largest social demographic. This is critical if we are truly committed to generating possibilities for human flourishing and decent living.

Secondly, those of us who consider ourselves on the ‘Left’ should lead the way in countering moralistic narratives about drug use, homelessness and even the hustle. In understanding the underlying drivers of homelessness and substance use, it is our duty to ask pertinent questions such as: What were the social conditions that led to homelessness and drug use as a solution? What is required for young people excluded from the labour market to feel they live a life of meaning and purpose? What can we learn about survivalism and social cohesion from unexpected places like the streets, the shelters and the few harm reduction centres that do exist?

Making sense of this lived reality requires us to suspend moral judgement of the coping strategies of those living on the margins – people who use drugs, sex workers, the LGBTIQ+ community. These key population groupings are innovators and real disruptors. They shake us to our core because they make tough decisions and face the consequences of these decisions. Yet they are also vulnerable population groupings – vulnerable to illness and to powerful social ordering groups such as the police.

Reducing vulnerability, and creating opportunities for meaning, engagement and connection is an excellent project for the labour movement. So too is providing platforms for truth speaking for those that are truly voiceless. It is connection and purpose that will bring back to life the hope and contagious energy that characterised South Africa’s youth at a time we thought would be our darkest. This requires a different type of organising – one that recognises the chaotic existence that presently typifies the lives of our youth.

This challenge is not just for organised labour. It is extended to intellectuals who engage with labour and the unions. We need to think more seriously about what is meant by 'productive labour' and if what most of our youth are engaging in to get by can and should be defined as such. It is my view that by not viewing the hustle as a social activity that exists outside of what is typically viewed as productive labour, we are appeasing our conscience. Advocating all forms of labour as 'productive' is of little material value to the hustlers and the dumpster survivalists. Our role is to demystify by calling social reality by what it is, and finding solutions where they already exist.

These solutions exist on the margins amongst those who are in survivalist mode. It is this growing social cohort that gets by despite the lack of insight, vision and strategy of our labour movement and its allies.

At the start of this article I referred to the significance of political organisations in the 1980s and the 1990s in regard to the youth. Organisations such as Cosatu, civic organisations and others under the UDF umbrella worked alongside young people. In so doing they provided direction when required, but most importantly they generated meaningful connection. This meaningful connection with 'adult' organisations no longer exists in the youth space. Not only does this diminish the legitimacy and the mobilising capacity of our social movement organisations, the unions included, it also entrenches disconnect.

If we are serious about reducing the harms associated with problematic drug use, it is critical to rekindle meaningful connection. It is this connection, not sobriety, that is the opposite of addiction. Without connecting in a meaningful way with our young people and recognising how they are navigating the burden of the future, we are likely to find ourselves in an ever-increasing storm of problematic drug use and hopelessness. It is time for reinvention, not replication.

My final point is about the importance of humanising as a universal practice. At the end of the day, no matter where in the world your 'accident of birth' (to borrow from sociologist Arundhati Roy) lands you, your humanity and humanness remain. This universal humanity is what connects us not just as a nation but as people of the South with people of the North.

It is with this in mind that the labour movement should be forging global solutions. It is an absurdity that there are parts of the world where jobs cannot be filled. In these countries there are job summits being held to fill the vacant positions in both skilled and unskilled jobs. This, simultaneously with places in the global South where labour market opportunities simply do not exist. Real internationalism of labour would talk to this connectedness, placing young people at the centre of both sense-making of the present and of solution-making. Put this way, the labour movement today is even more important than it ever has been.